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# The Klan Issue: How French Canadians Combatted Nativism through 1920 Maine Local Politics

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# The Klan Issue:

## How French Canadians Combatted Nativism through 1920 Maine Local Politics

ERIN BEST

In America's Age of Trump, we must all consider the long history of white nationalism. The 2016 presidential election paved the way for a resurgence and more public appearance of this type of bigotry. Often falling under the general use of the "Alt-Right," white nationalism became associated with Donald Trump and his presidency through multiple avenues and occasions. David Duke, a former Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, endorsed Trump for president and, later, his actions while in office, forcing the American public to question Trump's stance on racism and white nationalism. Trump's reluctance to denounce immediately Duke's support fired up the Alt-Right base, while simultaneously inciting anger from many Americans.<sup>1</sup> The tipping point for most Americans occurred with the Unite the Right rally, where both white supremacists and white nationalists gathered in Charlottesville, Virginia on August 11 and 12, 2017, to protest the removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Baker, "A President Who Fans, Rather Than Douses, the Nation's Racial Fires; White House Memo," *The New York Times*, January 12, 2018.

Counter-protesters met the white nationalists, then violence erupted and multiple injuries occurred. The clash resulted in one woman's death.<sup>2</sup> On the day of the rally, Trump did not condemn the white nationalists or supremacist groups. Instead, he waited two days and blamed both sides for the violence that had occurred.<sup>3</sup> The Alt-Right did not take Trump's comments seriously, as the *New York Times* shows in their article, "Trump Condemns Racists but Creates Fresh Uproar."<sup>4</sup> The President's ability to allow white nationalists to feel comfortable and powerful in politics and society mirrors a time in the United States' history when organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan felt that same level of comfort.

The 1920s offer a unique opportunity for historians to explore the sources and influences of organized race hatred. The 1920s represent a peak in nativist rhetoric and policy in the United States and the Ku Klux Klan reemerged as a key influencing factor in this resurgence of hate. Unlike the Klan that held power during the Reconstruction Era, the "New Klan" targeted more than just African Americans; it also targeted immigrants and Catholics, and anyone who did not reflect what the Klan defined as "100 percent American," which it narrowly defined as Anglo-Saxon and Protestant. While the core of the Klan's base remained in the Old South, it also gathered a large presence in the Midwest and parts of the Southwest, in states such as

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<sup>2</sup> Joe Heim, "Recounting a Day of Rage, Hate, Violence, and Death," *The Washington Post*, August 14, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Shear and Maggie Haberman, "Trump Defends Initial Remarks on Charlottesville; Again Blames 'Both Sides,'" *The New York Times*, August 15, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Glenn Thrush, "Trump Condemns Racists but Creates Fresh Uproar," *New York Times*, August 15, 2017.

Indiana and Oklahoma.<sup>5</sup> The Klan also drifted north and attempted to assert itself in New England politics during the 1920s. In New England, its members publicly opposed Irish Americans and Franco-Americans because of their religious identities as Catholics.<sup>6</sup> Specifically, in Maine, the 1924 gubernatorial election brought the issue to the front stage, particularly on matters of legislation and denouncing the Klan. Within the context of local politics, the Ku Klux Klan in Maine emerged as a largely Anglo-Saxon, Protestant movement that sought to limit the culture and lives of Franco-Americans, but the ability of Franco-Americans to resist the attacks shows the power of collective and mobilized opposition to hatred.

The 1920s symbolize the height of nativism in the United States. After World War I, the United States took on an isolationist agenda and sought to limit the influx of immigrants into the country. Native-born Americans, filled with racist ideologies, feared that radical ideas, such as socialism and anarchism, would enter the country via immigration. Nativism in the 1920s occupied only a minority of native-born American ideology, but it effectively contributed to legislative change. The 1924 quota system was a major legislative victory for the nativist movement. An extension of the 1922 temporary war-time bill, the law set a cap on the total number of immigrants entering the United States, and specifically targeted “undesirable” immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. The quota system utilized

percentages, based on the 1890 census, mainly because that census utilized fewer ethnic categories, which limited the number of immigrants entering the country. In 1890, a majority of immigrants entering the United States came from northern and western Europe, while a smaller number entered from eastern and southern Europe. By using the 1890 “standard,” the United States could encourage more immigration from the regions they preferred. Immigration historians often note that the quota system did not set a cap on North American immigrants entering the country, but recognize that this did not stop discrimination towards Canadians or Mexicans.<sup>7</sup> Yet, French Canadians still faced discrimination when they migrated south. In Maine, the Klan opposed Franco-Americans because they did not represent its Anglo-Saxon, Protestant ideals.

Starting in the mid-nineteenth century, hundreds of thousands of French Canadians migrated south to the United States, more specifically to New England. They emigrated out of Quebec due to lack of employment opportunities, poor wages, and the crushing burden of debt. Most French Canadians intended only to move south temporarily. New England offered opportunities for economic success, but when a recession hit the American economy, these immigrants faced challenges when attempting to return home.<sup>8</sup> French Canadians often came from rural areas, but the industrialization of New England mills allowed them to enter the paid

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<sup>5</sup> Rory McVeigh, *The Rise of the Ku Klux Klan: Right-Wing Movements and National Politics*, 26.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Paul Richard, “This Is Not a Catholic Nation’: The Ku Klux Klan Confronts Franco-Americans in Maine,” *The New England Quarterly* 82, no. 2 (2009) 287.

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<sup>7</sup> Mae M. Ngai, “The Architecture of Race in American Immigration Law: A Reexamination of the Immigration Act of 1924,” *The Journal of American History* 86, no. 1 (1999) 70.

<sup>8</sup> Yves Roby, *The Franco-Americans of New England: Dreams and Realities* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2004), 19.

workforce easily, as mills sought low-skilled employees. By the twentieth century, unable to return home due to lack of finances, French Canadians settled all around New England, with a high concentration of them in Maine. Franco-Americans found success in the textile industry and often sent their children to parochial schools where they learned and practiced Catholicism, which caused resentment among native-born Americans. Throughout the 1920s, the Klan in Maine publicly opposed Franco-Americans for their religious practices, seeking to limit their culture and lifestyle through legislation.

The 1924 gubernatorial election in Maine showed the clear divide between supporters of the Ku Klux Klan and those opposed to it. The Klan became a powerful faction of the Republican Party in Maine because of the party's unwillingness to comment on the Klan. While Maine's election seemed to focus largely on the denunciation of the Klan, the national discourse was different. William Pattangall, the Democratic nominee for the governorship of Maine, wanted the national Democratic Party to oppose the Ku Klux Klan collectively and publically to the same degree that he did. The Republican nominee, Ralph Brewster, did not publicly oppose or denounce the Klan. The 1924 *New York Times* article, "How Klan Figures in Maine Election" gives insight on the different goals and values that the nominees held, while attempting to determine

how the Klan's power in Maine grew. The anonymous journalist wrote, "The plan failed, for the convention, despite Mr. Pattangall's advocacy of an anti-Klan platform declaration, refused to adopt it... The Maine delegates returned home... without the endorsement of their party."<sup>9</sup> If Pattangall had successfully secured his party's opposition to the Klan, it would have diluted the Klan's power not just in Maine, but across the whole nation. The national Democratic Party's unwillingness to oppose the Klan officially shows the lack of unity with the national party because of the Klan's appeal to Southern Democrats, while it also shows the support that the Klan gained on a national level. Pattangall based his campaign on an anti-Klan rhetoric, but he failed to secure the governorship with this alone. The Klan avoided being opposed outright by Democrats, which allowed it to gain more power through Republican Party and local government positions.

The 1924 gubernatorial election in Maine showed the true influence of the Klan in local politics. Many Maine residents aligned themselves with the Klan's interests during the gubernatorial election because they represented an opposition to Irish Americans and Franco-Americans. These residents felt that these hyphenated Americans threatened the already struggling Maine economy. Unlike in the South, where the Klan largely allied itself with Democrats, the Klan in New England often backed Republican candidates, and the gubernatorial election in Maine did not differ from

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<sup>7</sup> Mae M. Ngai, "The Architecture of Race in American Immigration Law: A Reexamination of the Immigration Act of 1924," *The Journal of American History* 86, no. 1 (1999) 70.

<sup>8</sup> Yves Roby, *The Franco-Americans of New England: Dreams and Realities* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004), 19.

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<sup>9</sup> "How Klan Figures in Maine Election," *New York Times*, August 31, 1924.

this regional characteristic. Prior to the election, the Republican Party had dominated Maine public offices, which reduced the necessity of the Klan's support in obtaining votes. Some sociologists have noted that the Klan thrived in areas where it emerged as a solution to local problems, while also being a moral support for the dominant demographic. In the case of Maine, the dominant demographic tended to be white, native-born, and Republican and this is where the Klan found refuge.<sup>10</sup> Even within this safe haven, the Klan's mere presence in the state forced many people to reconsider their political allegiances, including Franco-Americans. The 1924 *New York Times* article "How Klan Figures in Maine Election" reported that "Heretofore the French-Canadians in those counties of this State in which they are most numerous have generally voted the Republican ticket, but on the anti-Klan issue raised by Mr. Pattangall they may not do so this year."<sup>11</sup> The Franco-Americans in Maine realigned their political affiliation to the Democratic Party based on local Democratic opposition to the Klan's rhetoric. Although the national Democratic Party did not support William Pattangall's opposition to the Klan, his position in Maine allowed Franco-Americans to realign themselves accordingly. While on a national level this shift did not make much of an impact, Franco-Americans' political adjustment shows one way they attempted to defend themselves from discrimination. This political realignment was manifested when politicians began debate over an

amendment to the Maine constitution to prohibit public funds from being used in parochial schools.

Franco-American families often sent their children to parochial schools to foster their culture, language, and religion, but this only encouraged opposition from the Klan. During the early twentieth century, Franco-Americans felt conflict when deciding whether to send their children to public schools or to parochial schools. Public schools promised to assimilate immigrant children more easily into American society, but parochial schools allowed for these children to keep their French language and their own culture alive. In 1919, the Maine legislature passed a law that prohibited the use of the French language in public schools, which Franco-Americans deemed an attack on their identity. This law also made parochial schools a more appealing option. To draw more Franco-American families to the parochial schools, some Catholic parishes stopped charging tuition and instead covered school costs through donations and by reorganizing their finances to allow for more money to be used in their schools. When this failed, parochial schools pushed on, but politicians attempted to pass legislation limiting their ability and influence throughout the 1910s and 1920s. Republican politicians and the Klan argued that teaching foreign languages in parochial schools did not promote an American national identity. Proposed legislation appeared in all parts of New England. These laws ranged in their aims, from completely eliminating private schools to limiting the amount of time a foreign language could be taught in a parochial school. In Yves Roby's 2004 book, *The Franco-Americans of New England: Dreams and Realities*, he argues "That was why the elite sought, by their own exemplary conduct, to convince their fellow-citizens that the attachment to the French language or to the Catholic religion in no way

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, McVeigh, *The Rise of the Ku Klux Klan*, 199.

<sup>11</sup> "How Klan Figures in Maine Election," *New York Times*, August 31, 1924.

altered their devotion to the American Republic.”<sup>12</sup> The Ku Klux Klan believed that the unwillingness of Franco-Americans to relinquish their French language came from misplaced allegiances to the Catholic Church, but in reality, their grip on their first language had more to do with retaining their heritage. The debate on whether public funds should be used in parochial schools became an important matter in Maine’s 1924 gubernatorial election.

The Klan opposed the parochial schools because it felt that they prevented immigrants from assimilating into American society and because of their Catholic affiliations. During the 1920s, the Klan wanted to promote Protestantism and “Americanism” at the expense of Catholics. The 1924 election focused on an amendment that would prohibit the use of public funds in parochial schools. The influx of Catholic immigrants to the United States caused many native-born Americans to fear the allegiances they brought and their unwillingness to assimilate. The Klan became very outspoken against parochial schools and argued that not forcing Catholic immigrants to assimilate into American society threatened the safety of the United States. Klan members believed that immigrants’ traditions, religions, and feelings of loyalty to their home countries could not be compatible with life in the United States.<sup>13</sup> Eugene Farnsworth, an organizer for the Klan, became an outspoken champion of Protestantism and promoted a “100 Percent American” national identity. In the *Lewiston Daily Sun*’s 1923 article “Names of Local

Klan Agents Disclosed at Meeting in Auburn,” the paper quotes Farnsworth promoting Klan attitudes. Farnsworth reportedly stated, “If they are teaching Americanism in Parochial schools they are false to Rome. If they don’t they are false to America.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, Farnsworth claimed that a person could not be both a Catholic and an American because one would cancel out the other. He believed that Catholics would always answer to the Pope before they would answer to the United States government and based on that premise, he believed Catholicism should not be supported directly or indirectly by public funds in the United States. Contrary to what the Klan believed, Franco-Americans saw themselves as ideal immigrants, by moving to the United States, by working in the industrial sector, and by learning English. Franco-Americans believed these principles contributed to the foundation of the United States. How the Franco-Americans in Maine responded to the Klan represents their ability to be their own agents during a time when they faced discrimination.

While the rise of the Klan seemed imminent, the mobilization of Franco-Americans and the difficulties the Klan faced in the mid-1920s tells a different story. In Maine, the Klan faced both internal divisions and financial problems. Klan organizations in cities such as Auburn and Lewiston, which had high Catholic populations, faced internal divisions, which resulted in the formation of rival factions. Furthermore, the arrival of Edward Gayer, the new King Kleagle in Maine,

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<sup>12</sup> Roby, *Franco-Americans of New England*, 240.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Pegrarn, *One Hundred Percent American: The Rebirth and Decline of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2011), 48.

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<sup>14</sup> “Names of Local Klan Agents Disclosed at Meeting in Auburn,” *The Lewiston Daily Sun*, April 19, 1923.

<sup>15</sup> Mark Paul Richard, *Not a Catholic Nation: The Ku Klux Klan Confronts New England in the 1920s* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2015), 50.



prompted many Klan members to leave and follow their former leader, Eugene Farnsworth.<sup>15</sup> The Klan also faced financial problems. The organization became the target of many lawsuits and a rise in unemployment within their membership meant fewer members paid their dues regularly. To add to their financial difficulties, at the end of 1924, a massive and expensive building in Portland that the Klan had funded burned down. In addition, The Klan had asked the city of Portland to waive its property tax, claiming status as a religious and educational organization, but the city denied it.

While the Klan dealt with these hardships, Franco-Americans mobilized to defend themselves. Mark Richard's book, *Not a Catholic Nation*, describes the Ku Klux Klan in New England during the 1920s and one section of it focuses on the Klan in Maine. Richard describes the awareness that Franco-Americans had about their rights and their ability to become naturalized citizens, allowing them to vote. Franco-Americans saw their ability to vote in elections as their strongest tool against the Klan. Richard describes the special election held in Maine in 1926, after the death of a senator. The Klan did not support the Republican Party's nominee, Arthur Gould. As a response, both Ralph Brewster, the governor, and the Klan put their support behind the Democratic nominee, Fulton Redman. Franco-Americans, who formerly crossed party lines in the 1924 gubernatorial election, voting for the Democratic nominee, used their voice to vote en masse for the Republican nominee, in order to oppose the candidate backed by the Klan.<sup>16</sup> Gould's overwhelming victory over the Klan-backed nominee shows how Franco-Americans acted as their own force to combat the discrimination

they faced. Although Franco-Americans may not have been the deciding vote, their ability to oppose collectively one nominee shows their desire to create a change in their government. While the Klan seemed to be an overwhelming force in Maine, the mobilization of Franco-Americans against the Klan and Klan-supported political figures shows the power that this minority faction could wield.

The Ku Klux Klan emerged in Maine as a group opposing Franco-Americans for their Catholic identities, but the ability of Franco-Americans to act as their own agents and protest the discrimination shows their ability to overpower a vocal, hate-focused minority. The Klan sought to limit the culture and use of the French language by Franco-Americans on a local level through state legislation. The Klan backed politicians in the state who had the ability to pass the type of legislation they wanted, such as the amendment prohibiting public funds from being used in parochial schools. While the Klan seemed to hold power over local politics, Franco-Americans mobilized their numbers and educated themselves on how to combat this opposition. Franco-Americans in Maine became naturalized citizens, enabling them to act and vote for the politicians who best represented them. Often, in the 1920s, that meant the politician not supported by the Klan. Their ability to mobilize and vote to help enable change in local politics can be used as an example today. In the divided Age of Trump, where the Alt-Right and white nationalist groups feel comfortable enough to publicly display their own bigotry in mainstream politics, Franco-American resistance to the power of hate through their political action can be used as proof of the power of popular politics to mitigate the power of hate in current politics.

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<sup>16</sup> Richard, *Not a Catholic Nation*, 52.



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